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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CURRICULUM AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE DAILY RECITATION

E. C. ROWE

Central State Normal School, Mount Pleasant, Mich.

Any problem connected with the high-school curriculum must necessarily be a complex one, and the complexity increases as one studies the subject. In an address before the National Educational Association two or three years ago Mr. Van Sickle, superintendent of the public schools of Baltimore, said: "There is a striking similarity in published courses of study. In them all we find practically the same subjects. There is no duly constituted authority to regulate this matter as in some other countries; each school district and each city may do as it chooses, yet all choose alike." This statement, I think, is open to question, for in a comparison of twenty catalogues from representative high schools—nine from Michigan and eleven from well-known schools in the country at large—I find that the twenty schools teach a total of forty-five different subjects, while only seven subjects are common to all. These are: Latin, German, English, algebra, geometry, physics, and chemistry. This seems as though the stable subjects, the subjects that make the major part of the course, are, after all, common to most schools, and that therefore Mr. Van Sickle's statement has foundation in fact. But when we discover that only two subjects, English and algebra, are compulsory in each of the twenty schools, it follows that, so far as the pupils are concerned, there is necessary uniformity only on the narrow basis of two subjects; for the reason that all the pupils in all these twenty high schools are required to study only two subjects in common. It is safe to say that no such condition obtains in the secondary schools of any other country. This condition is a direct result of the introduction of new subject-matter into the curriculum, the particular new subject-matter introduced in each case being due in no small degree to local considerations.

Now, not only do these schools differ widely in the subject-

matter making up the curriculum, but still more in the number of subjects carried by each pupil, and consequently in the length of time and number of hours during a week devoted to each subject. Another observation, especially pertinent to the present discussion, is that those schools which have freely introduced new subjects, and have at the same time retained the plan of election of courses, are those in which subjects are studied two or three hours during a week. Inasmuch as a school system, like any other social machine, tends to become stereotyped, changes are most easily introduced in the details farthest removed from the public. It will be easily seen that tradition and school machinery would be less disturbed by cutting down the number of hours of recitation during a week than by reorganizing the courses of study or changing the established length of time devoted to each subject in order to make room for new subject-matter. This would be the line of least resistance, which is the line usually followed by the Anglo-Saxon in bringing about institutional changes. It would seem, therefore, that this process of enriching the course of study is in no small degree directly responsible for the change in the number of recitations. At first thought it may appear that there can be no possible relation between the number of hours which a subject is to receive and the enriching of the curriculum. But a little historical study of the subject clearly reveals that this two- or three-hour plan, more common a few years ago than now, has come about in just this way. In the large cities where life is complex, and where the schools attempt to adjust themselves to new lines of thought and activity, one naturally finds elaborate courses of study, and in almost every case the two- or three-hour plan employed. For example, the courses of study for New York, St. Louis, and Cleveland show from thirty to thirty-four different subjects, and a considerable number of them pursued from two to three hours.

The vital question, therefore, as ordinarily conceived, is the one relating to the distribution of both old and new material over an already full course of study. As to the introduction of new material, the eagerness for knowledge and novelty is so strong that there is seldom any difficulty. The acquisitive instinct is so strong in us that it is not the taking on of the new, but rather the giving up of the old to make room for the new, that interferes with our traditions and stirs

up antagonism. This is a perfectly natural result. It is comparatively easy for a man to take on something new, provided it does not involve the displacement of anything already incorporated in his life. It is precisely the same with the school and the curriculum. As the sloughing off of useless physical organs and the dying of functionless instincts are exceedingly slow processes, so the giving up of adjustments to obsolete conditions is always a tedious and painful experience. Hence we commonly have the anomaly of putting new wine into old bottles, of forcing new conditions into old forms. And so it is with the school. In the simple agricultural life of New England when there was only one or at most two vocations that called for a "liberal education," Harvard College and the New England Latin School probably served their day and generation as well with an almost exclusively Latin and Greek curriculum as the present high school serves its constituency with the so-called enriched curriculum. But the time soon came when this simple agricultural life became more complex socially and industrially, and the school, in turn, was forced to meet these new conditions with a more complex curriculum.

It is interesting to trace the different ways in which the secondary school has changed its curriculum, with the accompanying effects upon the recitation, to meet the changing and increasing demands of a developing community. At least three different ways can be traced in which the high school has incorporated new subject-matter, all of which have had a more or less direct effect upon the recitation. The first was by gradually increasing the number of required subjects and the total number of hours for each student. This fact is so well illustrated by a passage from a recent work on education that I shall quote it in full:

The first move in the direction of making the high school more nearly meet the demands of everyday life was through the addition to the still prescribed course, of a number of subjects—which, it was thought, would be useful to the student who was not to take the college step. In the decade from 1850 to 1860, when the plan was being exploited, it was not unusual for the high schools to require more than twenty separate subjects for all students, and in one instance the number was twenty-nine, and this in a three-years' course. The program of the Boston English High School, with a three-years' course, contained, previous to 1860, the following subjects: arithmetic, algebra, geometry, geography, general history, history of the United States, reading, grammar, declamation,

rhetoric, composition, bookkeeping, natural philosophy, natural theology, evidences of Christianity, navigation, mensuration, astronomical calculation, constitution of the United States, drawing, logic, and French.¹

The early American high school is not the only secondary school to use this method of bringing the school into closer relation with "everyday life." The development of the curriculum of the German *Gymnasium* shows the same practice in its early history. With the establishment of the *Realschulen* the *Gymnasium* was compelled, on grounds of self-defense, to incorporate those subjects for which the *Realschule* stood, before it was ready to make any material reduction in the time devoted to the classical studies. The result was the same as in our early high schools—an increase in the number of required subjects and recitation hours for each student. The assumption that subjects in the course must be taken by everybody, that the time given the established subject could be reduced but little, if any, and that, if new subjects were to be added, the total number of subjects to be carried by each pupil must be increased, could not but result in overburdening the pupil, or in superficial work, or in both, as was not infrequently the case.

With the failure of this attempt to adjust to new subject-matter, there appeared three plans, all of which are more or less still in vogue, viz.: first, the reduction of the period for which each subject was to be carried, involving the study of fewer subjects simultaneously; second, the reduction of the number of subjects required, by the creation of different courses, with permission to elect a particular course; and, third, the reduction of the number of hours a week devoted to a subject, thus requiring more subjects to be carried simultaneously. The first of these three plans is practical only where the year is broken up into, at least, three terms, and has largely gone out of use owing to the extensive and increasing adoption of the semester or half-year plan.

The second method, the creation of different courses, with the consequent election of a particular course which, when elected, must be rigidly adhered to, has long been a popular means of adapting the high-school curriculum to the demands made upon it by an increasingly complex environment; but, though popular, it too is now

¹ Dexter, *History of Education in the United States*.

giving signs of rapid disintegration and, as is already the case in some progressive schools, will probably be quite generally set aside. In a study of one hundred and seventy-six high-school courses reported in the *Pedagogical Seminary* during 1901, Professor Phillips, of Denver University, found that eighty-six of this number were conducted on the plan of fixed courses. An examination of the catalogues from some of these eighty-six schools shows that a few have since changed to the plan of a very limited number of prescribed subjects for all pupils and election of any of a group of subjects by each pupil.

The third plan, that of reducing the number of hours a week and increasing the number of subjects simultaneously carried, has been extensively combined with the plan offering the election of a course, with but little election of subjects. For example, a well-known western high school with nine prescribed courses offers a total of thirty-one subjects, sixteen of them running from one to three hours a week. This plan is based on the German system, where there is election of schools, but no election of courses and practically no election of subjects. The pupil in the Prussian *Gymnasium* never carries less than nine, and sometimes ten, subjects during a course of nine years. The minimum number of hours of recitation a week is thirty and the maximum thirty-three. At most, therefore, thirty-three recitation hours are distributed over not less than nine subjects, with a general average of three and two-thirds hours a week for each subject, only Latin, Greek, and mathematics receiving four or more hours. Out of the fourteen prescribed subjects, twelve never receive more than three hours a week, and most of them only two. The plan of the *Realgymnasium* is practically the same. This plan has been tried in a number of Michigan high schools, and, so far as I know, has been dropped in every case. At one time it was possible for a pupil in a certain well-known Michigan high school to carry eight or nine subjects at once and not recite in any one of them more than three times a week. Of the twenty high-school courses examined in preparation for this paper, very few, permitted a pupil to carry more than five subjects at a time, excepting in commercial courses, the one marked exception being the Louisville Male High School, where it appears to be possible for a pupil to carry as many as twelve subjects during a part of the fourth year.

However well this plan may work in Germany, in our schools it does not seem to meet the needs. Moreover, it seems to me, there are a number of reasons why this plan would be more applicable in the German secondary schools than in our high schools. The first reason is to be found in the temperament and racial characteristics of the German people themselves. Slow and notoriously tenacious, they are therefore capable of a sustained effort of which the average American high-school student is ignorant. The second reason is that these German boys are surrounded by an unparalleled atmosphere of scholarship instead of a semi-commercial atmosphere. On this point I quote from Mr. Phillips' article, to which I have already referred. He says:

During the past meeting of the State Teachers' Association of Colorado, the council was overwhelmingly impressed by the fact that every educational problem was treated either directly or indirectly from the commercial standpoint. That the next program should be devoted to reviving higher aims of life and of education was deemed imperative. This spirit is not simply local; it is but the reflex of national life mirrored in our education.

That is a strong statement, and, if true, we cannot expect that in such an atmosphere our boys and girls will rise to the demands of a complex course of study made up of from five to eight or ten subjects, running from two to five hours each a week, unless those subjects partake of a commercial nature. Again, the German secondary schools are, as a rule, equipped with stronger teachers and with a more perfectly articulated system. With such teachers and such an organization even a two-hour course must mean something; for a strong teacher, working through a system that wastes no energy, will illuminate the subject in such a way as to impress it upon the pupil, even though he meets him at comparatively long intervals. A fourth reason may be ascribed to the fact that the German boy, living under a government of a paternal nature and in a society with fixed and external institutions, is not drawn into so many activities of an educational nature, outside of school, as is the American boy. In other words, the education of the American youth is not so exclusively a matter of the schools; other activities and other institutions are to him of relatively greater educational importance than they are to the German boy. This being the case, it is neither necessary nor wise to make his school life so complex and so strenuous as such a

curriculum calls for. Time should be left for the play of other forces and other institutions. A fifth reason is that the German boy, if he enters the secondary school at all, remains for a longer time, not only because the course is longer, but as a matter of choice. For this reason he can afford to be less intensive in certain subjects in order to get a wider range. If, then, only a relatively small percentage of American boys who enter the high school remain throughout the course, what they need is not the wider range of subjects, but rather an intensive study of those subjects lying close to the everyday needs of life. This can be accomplished only by narrowing the range of subjects, reducing the length of time given them, and increasing the number of recitations a week.

I have entered into this comparison between the German secondary school and the American high school to forestall at this point the possible argument in favor of this semi- or tri-weekly plan, that it works well in Germany and is therefore applicable here. The argument would hold if the conditions obtaining in the two countries were the same; but, as they are not, it breaks down.

Besides these comparative arguments against the adoption of the German system in our schools, there are others of a more general nature to be urged against a choppy program, such as it would involve if generally adopted.

While it must be conceded that there is no psychological principle that determines just exactly how many subjects a student can carry or just how many hours he can spend in the classroom, this much, nevertheless, has been established, that the law of healthy mental growth demands simplicity, digestion, and plenty of elbow room. To my mind, a program made up of from five to ten subjects, running from one to five hours a week, violates this fundamental law and, as a rule, results in superficial work and scatter-brained pupils.

If there is a psychological sequence of studies, answering to the development of the pupil, then such a program fails to comply with the pedagogical principle of striking while the iron is hot. The intensive study of a subject for a short time, followed by a complete change in some part of the pupil's program, seems to fit in best with the intensive but shifting interests of the average adolescent. The early adolescent is still more of a boy than a fully developed man, and

should be treated on that basis. Treat him on the basis of what he is, and more work will be secured from him than if treated on the basis of what he may some day be.

From the Herbartian point of view, this program is to be criticised on the ground that the many and abrupt daily transitions from subject to subject call for the functioning of too many groups of ideas, and thus result in confusion. In everyday language, we should say that there are too many irons in the fire, and, therefore, efficiency is destroyed. When a boy's school activities are so manifold that each evening he has to consult the schedule for the following day in order to know what lessons to prepare, a simplification of his school life is in good taste, that it may be saved from the limbo of farcical unrealities.

Considered again from the point of view of the end of education, whether that end be conceived of as that of "character" as defined by the Herbartians, or as "productive ability" as defined by the Committee of Ten, the choppy, complex program does not serve the end sought as does the simple, intensive program with daily recitations, for the reason that neither "character" nor "productive ability" is developed without the systematic and intensive penetration of some subject far enough to reveal some of the deeper realities of life that take hold of the individual. Superficial study, a smattering of a large number of things, may impart a certain polish, but it never seriously takes hold of the character or intellect.

This brings us to the consideration of an objection that may be raised at this point. It may be urged that it does not follow that the carrying of from five to ten subjects, with semi-weekly recitations, necessarily means the incorporation of more subjects in the course of study, and therefore the superficial treatment of each, or any, of the subjects. While this objection holds from purely a logical standpoint, it does not hold when actual practice is considered. It will be found upon investigation, I think, that in most cases where the two- or three-hour plan is used, more subjects are actually studied than in cases where the four- or five-hour plan is employed. In fact, the plan came into use only when there was a demand for the introduction of new subjects. This practice is defensible, if our motto is, "Not much, but many things." I am here assuming that for their

bearing upon the habits of the individual and life in general a few things well done are infinitely better than many superficially performed. A sacrifice of depth and thoroughness, anywhere above the grades, to range and extent, must always result in a sacrifice of depth of feeling and thoroughness of insight to a superficial and flippant cosmopolitanism, a cheap thing for which to make a sacrifice of any sort.

The two- or three-hour plan fails to impress the pupil with the importance of the subject. Every subject in a high-school course should be there for serious and well-defined reasons. In such a spirit it should be treated by teachers and pupils; and too often we see an indifferent, if not flippant, attitude toward these two- and three-hour subjects. Not infrequently these hours are looked upon as a signal for relaxation. The difference between two hours and five hours is to the pupil, the measure of the relative importance of the subjects, which are therefore correspondingly treated.

This plan leads naturally to long lessons, to an overemphasis upon independent work on the part of the pupil, and therefore to poor recitations. It is bad enough to have Monday lessons once a week, but when they come twice or three times, with no others intervening of a redeeming character, the spirit of abandon too often takes possession of both teacher and taught.

Long lessons and poor recitations soon result in loquacious instruction, which, in turn, fosters at best a passive attitude toward the subject and the spirit of good-natured tolerance toward the teacher.

It wastes time in gathering up the thread of thought which has been entirely lost or dimmed in memory by intervening days and subject-matter. The threads of one subject are hardly gathered up before they are dropped and those of another taken up. Every student knows that it takes time to work himself into the spirit of a subject, and that without that spirit little that is valuable can be accomplished. A fluctuating among a half-dozen or more subjects hardly conduces to this end. On the whole, it fails to stimulate the pupil to his best effort, which can be obtained only by the process of narrowing his consciousness and energies upon a few things; it lacks adaptation to the heightened enthusiasm of youth; it calls for irregular preparation, and so fosters the habit of irregularity, and thus weakens response to constant obligations.

Turning now to the consideration of a conception of the course of study that, it seems to me, would naturally preserve the daily recitation, and at the same time avoid a narrow and restricted curriculum, I wish to quote from a paper by Professor Dewey, in which he enunciates certain principles which seem to me to be fundamental. He says:

In the future it is going to be a mere question of discovering and observing certain broader lines of cleavage, which affect equally the disposition and power of the individual and the social callings for which education ought to prepare the individual. It will be, in my judgment, less and less a piecing together of certain studies in a more or less mechanical way in order to make out a so-called course of study running through a certain number of years; and more and more a grouping of studies together according to their natural mutual affinities and reinforcements for the securing of certain well-marked ends. In my judgment, many of the problems now dealt with under the general head of election versus rescription can be got at more correctly and handled more efficiently from the standpoint of the elastic versus the rigid curriculum; and elasticity can be had only where there is breadth. The need is not so much an appeal to the untried and more or less capricious choice of the individual, as for a region of opportunities large enough and balanced enough to meet the individual on his every side, and provide for him that which is necessary to arouse and direct. With the rounding out of the high school to meet all the needs of life, the standard changes. It ceases to be these vague abstractions. We get, relatively speaking, a scientific problem—that is, a problem with definite data and definite methods of attack. We are no longer concerned with abstract appraisals of studies by the measuring-rod of culture and of discipline. Our problem is rather to study the typical necessities of social life, and the actual nature of the individual in his specific needs and capacities.¹

A high-school course of study satisfying such a conception would be both extensive and intensive; extensive, in that it mirrors all life; intensive, in that it gives each individual an opportunity to concentrate upon a group of organically related subjects bearing more or less directly upon some line of future activity, and thereby providing for an adaptation which is determined by the nature and the needs of the individual, rather than by an external authority. A fundamental criticism of many high-school courses of today is that the adaptation for which they provide is predetermined, and thus forced upon the individual pupil. This is not equivalent to saying that no subjects should be required; the contention is that, if requirements

¹ *School Review*, January, 1904.

are made, provision should also be made to make them on a more individual basis, and thus avoid that mechanical and individual choice of courses, so often seen, which must be painful to every thoughtful teacher. If the course is to be formulated at all, and thus required, let it be done with an individual in mind, and not in an *a priori* fashion with no regard for concrete and individual demands. A course thus formulated would reflect an actual world and possess the warmth of individual life, and could not but be a factor in calling forth the energies of him whose very tendencies, hopes, and aspirations had been consulted in the making of it. Such a course, formulated on the basis of the needs and development of the individual pupil, could not wisely be determined for its entirety at the beginning. The subjects to be taken, outside of a certain core at least, would be determined from time to time by the pupil's own progress; every stage in the unfolding of his faculties would be a new cue for the determining of future work, not necessarily to the extent of satisfying mere whims, but to the extent of attempting to give him from time to time that sort of mental food which would best further his own development.

I believe that if this sort of constant adjustment and readjustment is to be carried on effectually, the pupil ought not to be hampered by long courses running through a year or more, and that, therefore, subjects should continue through a shorter period, with daily recitations. It is not, moreover, true that frequently a high-school student finds himself in a long course of study for which he is ill-prepared, gets discouraged, drops out of the course or out of school, or, if he remains, merely marks time to the end only to fail? In fact, in all cases of poor preparation or mediocre ability, where there is considerable dependence upon personal aid and constant stimulation, the intensive courses and daily recitation seem to me the only way whereby that aid and stimulation can be successfully given.

A course of study thus arranged would possess the practical advantage of offering any and all of its subject-matter in a variety of combinations, the actual number depending, of course, upon the equipment of the school; but, in any case, the entire course would be more practical because, in so far as possible, every subject in it would be more often available when wanted. This arrangement would involve

many electives and practically no stereotyped course of study. It is to be remembered, however, that the word "electives" does not necessarily mean that the course of study pursued by the student is wholly determined by his own whims. I am here using the term, rather, in the sense that somebody—whether pupil, or teacher, or both working together—has an opportunity to determine a course which shall be more individual in its application than a prearranged course could possibly be, and thus bring the school closer to each individual pupil.

Moreover, it is not true that pupils, when given a voice in selecting subjects, always choose "snap" courses. A very interesting case is that of the high school at Galesburg, in which no subjects are definitely prescribed. We are told that "of the class of 1900, consisting of thirty-two boys and sixty-two girls, English was taken by all, general history by 97 per cent., botany by 88, civil government by 89, algebra by 75, physics by 66, Latin by 56, and geometry by 46 per cent."

There are two ideas, fundamental in our social and industrial life, which are but slowly coming to be embodied in our high school, namely, the freedom of the individual, and the concentration of his energies. The first has always been with us; the latter is the natural product of a growing and differentiating society. If these two ideas are to be adequately reflected in the high school, then these two things will naturally follow an elastic course of study and the daily recitation in, at least, the principal subjects offered.